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Doubts about US morale in Iraq as troops refuse 'suicide mission'

17 soldiers investigated in breakdown of discipline

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Discipline and morale among US troops in Iraq was under fresh scrutiny last night as the military admitted that 17 soldiers were being investigated for refusing to operate a fuel convoy because of safety fears.

The soldiers, from a unit north of Baghdad, told family members that they considered the convoy destined for Taji to be a "suicide mission", citing the poor condition of their vehicles and the absence of ground and air support to protect the convoy.

The refusal, confirmed by military sources in Baghdad, is the first time that concerns about equipment and safety have led to a major breakdown of discipline. Allegations about the state of US army equipment have been aired throughout the conflict and have become a feature of the US presidential campaign, with senator John Kerry airing the subject in presidential debates. But it is the first time that doubts about morale among US troops stationed in Iraq have surfaced so publicly.

Refusal to obey orders in a combat zone is a serious military offence. Yet, the occupation has become a perilous situation, with more than 1,000 US troops killed since the invasion.

Security fears have been heightened by near-daily ambushes and roadside bombs; yesterday a car bomb in Baghdad killed 10 Iraqis. On Thursday two blasts inside the heavily fortified Green Zone left six dead.

All but two of the 19 reservists in the fuel platoon of the 343rd Quartermaster Company refused to operate a delivery on Wednesday morning. They were read their rights and moved from military barracks into tents, the wife of one of the soldiers told the Clarion Ledger newspaper in Jackson, Mississippi.

A US army spokesman in Baghdad confirmed that a 19-member unit had failed to operate a convoy on Wednesday and that an investigation was under way. "Preliminary findings show that there were several contributing factors," said Sergeant Salju Thomas of the Combined Press Information Centre in Baghdad.

"The soldiers raised some valid concerns. Unfortunately, it appears a few soldiers chose to express those concerns in an inappropriate manner, leading to a temporary breakdown of discipline."

Sergeant Thomas stressed that the soldiers had not been detained or arrested.

Two investigations have been set in motion by the 13 Corps Support Group. One, in Tallil, where the unit is based, will look at the nature of the soldiers' complaints, including the state of their equipment. The second will study "whether any offence of a

disciplinary nature has been committed and what other measures may be necessary", said Ser-geant Thomas.

The soldiers could be charged with wilful disobeying of orders, which could lead to dishonourable discharge, forfeit of pay and up to five years' confinement.

According to the Clarion Ledger, Amber McClenny, one of the soldiers who refused to go out on the convoy, called her mother in the US on Thursday and left a message saying: "They are holding us against our will. We are now prisoners."

Ms McClenny told her mother that the convoys were normally escorted by armed Humvees and helicopters but that they did not have that support on Wednesday.

"They knew there was a 99% chance they were going to get ambushed or fired at," Ms McClenny's mother said. "They would have had no way to fight back." She said her daughter had told her that the vehicles had been poorly maintained.

Jackie Butler, the wife of Sergeant Michael Butler, was quoted as saying: "When my husband refuses to follow an order, it has to be something major."

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